

# THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

By Ruth Walshe

The old Buddhism has been a severely masculine system, and only a few quite subordinate feminine deities were admitted. The higher deities are sexless and so are the inhabitants of the Buddha-fields. Femininity was generally thought to be a bar to the highest spiritual attainment, and on approaching Buddhahood the Bodhisattva ceased to be reborn as a woman.

These are facts we get from scholarly books – but my own interpretation is that the general position of women in ancient India was very subordinate to that of men, and therefore this oriental prejudice as we might call it, was taken over into Buddhism. In Japan the position is similar. The fact that the higher Buddhist deities and the inhabitants of the Buddha-fields are sexless shows clearly I think that as soon as we reach a deeper spiritual development, the difference of sex is no longer relevant. When we get to a deeper mode of awareness – the *I* being *more transcended* – the realm of dualism too becomes transcended; with its opposites, comparison, conviction, opinions *and* prejudices .....

With regard to the common Buddhist view that a woman cannot become a Buddha; I personally think that this is the view of Buddhists who have not gained much spiritual insight yet. They are still speculating this way and that way, swayed by their own personal as well as social and national prejudices. Though the Bodhisattva or Arahant still has a male or female body – in his state of Enlightenment he is no longer attached to any form. His male or female body is just an inheritance from his past karma. In his state of *Being* he has transcended all form and therefore either sex. We are back at the sexless higher deities and inhabitants of the Buddha-fields .....

Now let us have a look at the early Buddhist nuns – or Bhikkhunis, as they are called in Pali. It is said that the Buddha was at first unwilling to admit women into the religious organization of the Sangha. However, when Ananda approached Him on behalf of Mahapajapati Gautami – His step-mother – He finally agreed, though not without misgivings about the ultimate result of such a step. (He said the Dhamma would only last 500 years instead of a thousand). At the same time He laid down certain conditions which seemed to imply the subservience of women to men. So it

was laid down in the Bhikkuni Order that a nun even 100 years old had to defer to the most newly ordained Bhikkhu .....

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the Buddha should not be judged by the standards of the 20th century. In His day, to open the doors of organized religion to women and men alike was a great step forward.

It became a recognized fact that women could also be as learned and wise as men. So women earned the same right of access to the highest spiritual position of Arahantship.

This, to my mind, shows clearly that the subordinate position of the Buddhist nuns to the monks was mainly technical and not spiritual. As I mentioned earlier, this technical subordination was due to social conditions. The Bhikkhus knew very well that, where spiritual development was concerned – liberation from all suffering – such distinctions could no longer exist. They were but one aspect of human suffering itself.

Any woman who sincerely wished to enter the religious life was not denied the opportunity to do so, whether it was the courtesan Amrapali, or the daughter of King Tissa of Ceylon. In fact, the Sinhalese Princess was so intent on dedicating her life to the cause of the Dhamma and becoming a nun; that the Arahant Mahinda and the King requested Asoka to send his daughter – Mahinda's sister – to found the order of nuns in Ceylon. She was a nun, and had already attained Arahantship. Emperor Asoka did send his daughter, together with a group of nuns, who brought along a sapling from the sacred bodhi tree, which was planted with great pomp and jubilation near the monastery in Anuradhapura.

Through the book *Psalms of the Sisters*, translated from Pali and edited by Mrs. Rhys Davids, we get some glimpses into the life and spiritual attainment of these early Buddhist nuns – Bhikkhunis. They are Pali gathas, full of the joy of women who, after great personal struggles, had attained liberation from all suffering.

The motives which drove these women from the world to embrace the homeless life were twofold: Often it was the power of the Dhamma – preached by the Buddha or by a senior disciple of either sex – which brought about the crisis. Through the mental suffering a flash of insight arose into the universal impermanence in all things, and into the prospect of being

reborn into the infinite chain of life. Or sometimes the motive is deliverance, freedom from suffering – mental, moral, domestic or social – from some situation that has become intolerable. We find this second motive much more with regard to nuns than to monks, who as laymen had been much freer to live their own lives. But this wish to free themselves from suffering should not be looked upon as an escape. These early Buddhist nuns were deeply spiritual, mystical women who – through insight into suffering of all mankind – had from the start transcended their own personal hardship. In fact, some women postponed their renunciation in order to fulfill their duties in the world. A sacrifice of great order, the opposite of an escape. I personally feel that it was due to the far more limited, the narrower and harder life of women than men in those days, that their spiritual development was so great and rapid. In these Pali gathas many Bhikkhunis sing and glorify their free life on hill-tops under blue skies. Free at last from all bondage – liberated from the eternal round of rebirths. What a contrast from their former lives of domestic slavery and inequality!

The monastic life for the Buddhist nun was one of active as well as contemplative discipline. The Bhikkhuni becomes the pupil of some Theri. She leads the simple life and performs the duties of a novice. She works out herself her own salvation, qualifying to become a teacher and leader in her turn. The Theri's life was not wholly contemplative – but the Women's Order was also an organization for propagating the Dhamma and for helping to save stray sheep .....

The Bhikkhuni Order eventually died out. It can't be revived in Theravada countries, because the rules require ordination by both a monk and a nun. But in the Mahayana countries there are nuns whose ordination may in some cases be traceable back to the original Order. Most of them also go through a Bodhisattva ordination, similar to that of the monks – but subordinate to them. Here again the reason is oriental prejudice taken over from the lay-world.

A good example of this is Japan where even today, the woman takes a secondary place in everyday life. Through Dogen Zenji – the founder of Soto Zen in the 13th century – pronounced monks and nuns equal, their equality was in fact, only established in practice after the last World War. And this may have been brought about through American influence.

One disability still remains; while monks at many Buddhist monasteries are allowed to marry – nuns are not. But this might be rather an advantage in their struggle towards Enlightenment!

In Shin the problem doesn't arise as the priests don't profess to be *monks*. But as far as I know, there are no female priests. The beings reborn in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha are sexless, like the higher deities I mentioned in the beginning of this article.

However, an apparent counter-example to all this is the case of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. When we first meet him in India he is undoubtedly male, but in China he became Kwan-Yin a figure usually represented as female. In Japan there are two traditions about the sex of this figure who is called Kannon there. In Sanjusangendo – the famous temple of the 1000 Buddhas in Kyoto – the figures of Kannon look very feminine until you find they have moustaches. Although at first sight we seem to have a case of a male figure becoming female; what has really happened is that he has become sexless or bisexual. Again the proof that in the spiritual realm all opposites are transcended.

Apart from the Buddhist nun, there is the lay female disciple called Upasika, who observe the Precepts and helps to propagate the Dhamma in every respect. She is on an equal footing with the Upasaka – the lay male disciple. Though there are no more Bhikkhunis in Theravada countries, there are many Upasikas who live the life of nuns.

Now let us return to the West and consider our position as compared with the East. Fortunately in the West there are no such oriental prejudices. Therefore, we don't want to introduce them into Western Buddhism which is only just beginning to establish itself. So far we have no Western Buddhist nunnery. But as far as female lay members are concerned, we have the same opportunities to study, and help to propagate the Dhamma as the men. We start on an equal footing, and in my opinion, once a Buddhist nunnery is established in this country; the nuns too won't be subordinate to our Western Bhikkhus. And, as I said before, where the Dhamma is concerned, there can never be any difference between the sexes. Insight and Compassion are not bound to time and space – they are outside the realm of opposites – outside dualism. As we progress on the Path to Enlightenment these speculations won't worry us anymore. In the calm and serenity of a deeper mode of

awareness the question, whether a woman in Buddhism is inferior to a man,  
will no longer arise. It will be out of the question!

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